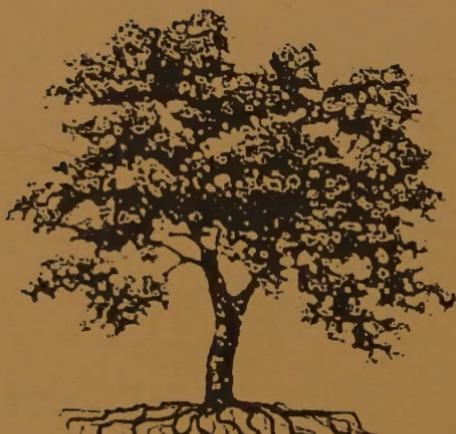


Youth Grows Old



Robert Nathan



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YOUTH GROWS OLD

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by

ROBERT NATHAN

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To the poet, B. P. Clark, Jr., whose
sweeter songs have travelled with my
own down these few streets to age.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to
the editors of the Atlantic Monthly,
the Century, Everybody's, the Smart Set,
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CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
Proem: The poet apologizes for himself.	1
The poet, made aware of time's passing . . .	2
. . . offers up a simple prayer.	3
At the symphony . . .	4
. . . he thinks how beauty forever escapes the lonely heart . . .	5
. . . and because he is still a young man, speculates on death.	6
He is oppressed with a sense of loneliness.	7
The poet contemplates the Exile.	8
He attends the funeral of a Jew.	9
He thinks of the friend of his youth, and of his room at college . . .	10
. . . and reproaches himself with idleness.	11-12
The poet describes his love.	13
He compares himself to the birds.	14
The poet envies a lark.	15
He considers the arrogance of wealth.	16
The poet speaks to his love.	17
The poet pleads with his love.	18
He sends his love a gift of flowers.	19
On top of a hill . . .	20
. . . he discusses himself.	21
The poet contemplates his daughter in the evening.	22
He writes in a book of poems.	23
The poet loses his love.	24
The poet is left to himself.	25
He closes his door.	26
He endeavors to console himself . . .	27
. . . by thinking that spring, tho' fled, will return.	28
He sings to himself . . .	29
. . . and listens to the wind.	30
He blames himself . . .	31
. . . and feels that since sorrow and he are such old friends . . .	32
. . . perhaps it is time to take sorrow more philosophically.	33
He decides to travel, and bids farewell to his home.	34
He visits the desert.	35

CONTENTS—*Continued*

	Page
He finds himself near his love . . .	36
. . . but hurries by.	37
. . . He bids farewell to his dreams.	38
He remembers past autumns . . .	39
. . . and wonders if beauty will ever come to him again.	40
In the cold and quiet north . . .	41
. . . he remembers the sun and sea of the southland.	42
The poet sees the city skyscrapers at evening.	43
He hears the sound of distant bells . . .	44
. . . and wonders when his journey will end.	45
The poet returns to his home.	46
He finds himself alone again.	47
He considers the passing years . . .	48
. . . and thinks that spring will never return as gaily as of old.	49
He turns to the hills for comfort.	50
He longs to lie at last in the southland.	51
He hears a knock at his door.	52
The poet opens to his guest.	53
He writes his epitaph.	54

YOUTH GROWS OLD

61

He lives on pain, and sells his utter
Grief for roses, bread, and butter.

PROEM: *The poet apologizes for himself.*

*Man grows up
In quietness,
As he grows older
He talks less.*

*When he is old
He sits among
Gray grandfathers
And holds his tongue.*

*I'd rather sit
By a wine-shelf
And tell people
About myself.*

The poet, made aware of time's passing . . .

May wanders quiet, warm, and whole,
Over the gardens of his soul;

Which gives him grief, for well he knows
May only comes when April goes,

And April gone, there end in truth
Youth's comfortable plans for youth.

To the bright pinafore of May
All gardens have a word to say,

Save only his that lie so bare
There are not even thistles there;

He would be satisfied to see
Even a bean, even a pea,

And praise the smallest flower that grows,
For June will come before he knows,

And once the spring is gone indeed,
There's no more planting any seed.

... offers up a simple prayer.

Lord God of Souls, if any be
To hear my prayer: from open doubt,
From unbelief in Thine and Thee,
I lift my rusty worship out.

The grand and eloquent design
I neither favor nor beseech,
The simple vision still be mine,
And mine the piety of speech.

Give me no more than homely words,
And kindly thoughts, to build my house;
No more than what is given the birds,
Or less than might be loaned a mouse.

At the symphony . . .

(Cesar Franck D Minor)

The 'cellos, setting forth apart,
Grumbled and sang, and so the day
From the low beaches of my heart
Turned in tranquillity away.

And over weariness and doubt
Rose up the horns like bellied sails,
Like canvas of the soul flung out
To rising and orchestral gales;

Passed on and left irresolute
The ebony, the silver throat;

Low over clarinet and flute
Hung heaven upon a single note.

... he thinks how beauty forever escapes the
lonely heart . . .

Beauty is ever to the lonely mind
A shadow fleeing; she is never plain.
She is a visitor who leaves behind
The gift of grief, the souvenir of pain.
Yes, if a trace of loveliness remain,
It is to memory alone addressed;
That spirit looks for beauty but in vain
Which is not by an inner beauty blessed.
And, as the ebbing ocean on the beach
Leaves but a trace of evanescent foam,
So beauty passes ever out of reach,
Save to the heart where happiness is home.
There beauty walks, wherever it may be,
And paints the sunset on the quiet sea.

... and because he is still a young man,
speculates on death.

Old lives drift quietly on sleepy days,
Falter and come to rest like rivered leaves,
Like autumn leaves blown along sunny water.
Old lives are waiting for their yesterdays
To catch them, until suddenly death lays
A tiny finger on their sleepiness,
And they are less than wind or anything,
The foam of clouds, the rain's adventuring.

You who have held death great, learn it is not!
Silence comes hushing down, and the last breath
Flutters against the dark and is forgot.
And then so slight, so delicate is death
That there is but the end of a leaf's fall,
A moment of no consequence at all.

He is oppressed with a sense of loneliness.

Comes fall, and with a sound of leaves,
The wind's incorrigible stroke
Blows out the insufficient sleeves
Of my forlorn and ancient cloak.

Expect no tenement, my friend,
Beneath this scant and threadbare vest;
Alone, to my indifferent end
I go my way, and God knows best.

The poet contemplates the Exile.

Thou, Israel, on a foreign shore,
So low, so low, that once was great,
What altars do thy sons adore?
The golden calf, the scarlet whore,
Phoenicia's greed, Assyria's hate.

No more, Jerusalem, no more
Shalt thou behold thine ancient state,
Or round thee in the cloudy gloom
Remark the heavenly advocate.
The Syrian desert shrouds his fate,
The Lydian wilderness his tomb.

He attends the funeral of a Jew.

Who breathes the air of native skies,
Knows all he needs to know of heaven,
The meadows are his paradise,
The mountains are his choirs seven,

About him like a sound of bells
At evening from the village steeple,
He hears in pious syllables
The old responses of his people.

There is a grave beneath the swell
Of some mean meadow in the west
For thee, for thee, O Israel,
There shalt thou find eternal rest,

And sorrow make more green the sod
Above thee and about thee laid,
Who otherwhere and else had made
No plea to heaven or troubled God.

*He thinks of the friend of his youth, and of his
rooms at college . . .*

Old friend, where you and I were once at home,
Autumn has given to another heir,
And other feet come drumming up the stair
Where oft I waited for your feet to come.
We have gone by, and I shall never share
The music of your samovar at night,
Or on a morning full of April light,
Come striding through the door and find you there.
But in the slow returning dusk once more,
Less eagerly, less certain of my part,
I'll come with an old music in my heart,
Down Holyoke to that familiar door.
Knowing you have not entered it all day,
I shall go very quietly away.

... and reproaches himself with idleness.

O Sleepy me,

Where are the years you borrowed out of youth,

Whereof you are in debt now to the wind,

And hills and sea?

Say, have you lost them in a little room,

And have your fingers like an idle sloven

Upon an empty loom

Spent the magnificence?

O Sleepy me,

How little you have woven.

Why, you took

All youth, no less

Of sky and challenge, all of eagerness,

And talk and lilacs.

And your fingers sought

Among old songs,

Old songs to be forgot

And nothing wrought.

There was a sky beyond your window seat,

I cannot find it here.

There was a chime at dusk in your teapot,

And voices coming near,

Voices along the street.

There was a wind beyond your window pane,

Blowing each day to brim the empty bowls

With wind and day again.

All, all forgot.

And from your room's determinate frontiers,
My heart no answer hears,
Nor wind, nor voice to call.

O sleepy me,
See, you have lost them all,
All the bright years,
In a little room nodding before the coals.

The poet describes his love.

So tall she is, and slender, and so fair,
So like a child for play, a queen for grace,
So pale and proud she is, with that bright hair
Blown in a storm of gold about her face;
So gay she is, and with such pretty words,
So like a thrush for making a sweet note,
And then her hands, like little anxious birds—
My heart to watch her trembles in my throat.
So that I am all wonder to behold her,
I being I, she being what she is,
And dare in reverence alone to fold her,
And touch her cheek and forehead with a kiss;
All loveliness she is, the whole world over,
All joy, all grief, all beauty to her lover.

He compares himself to the birds.

The Lord of all things
With liberalitee,
Maketh the small birds
To sing from every tree.

The Lord of all things
He maketh also me,
Giveth me no wings,
Giveth me no words.

The poet envies a lark.

Lark's wing
In the blue,
And no cloud
Down to the far, faint edges of the world.
Sun, and a spring wind
Running the roads.
Lark's wing
High, high,
Shrilling a song . . .

Oh Lark,
You do not know anything.
You do not sing to the sun, nor to the blue sky,
Nor to the spring winds running the roads.
You sing
Because you are a lark,
And have nothing else to do.
While I, a lover,
With the beauty of morning beating on my face—
I cannot sing at all!

He considers the arrogance of wealth.

When the Lord was born of Mary,
Rich men, wise and wary,
Living in that period,
Divided up the earth with God.

But God, who never slumbers,
Has a poor head for numbers.
So the rich as we progress
Get more, and God less.

Soon the dairy companies,
In unusual liveries,
Will attempt to furnish sunny
Heaven all its milk and honey.

The poet speaks to his love.

Hush, thou, beside my cheek,
And do not speak.
Love is not all, but let no other word
Than love be heard,
For as we older grow,
Wide wanders wisdom, but the heart beats slow.
Cheek beside cheek,
Hush, now, nor speak.

The poet pleads with his love.

Ah, love me, love me, for my youth is flying,
Age's old knuckles knock upon my heart;
The hour is late, the fire of faith is dying,
Stay with me love, while other guests depart.
Stay with me, beauty, for silence now, and sorrow
Stir in the corner; weariness awakes;
They will be there to sit with me tomorrow;
Stay with me, love, until the morning breaks.
Ah, love me, love me, I can feel September
Creep into winter, I can feel the snow.
You only, loving me, make me remember,
You only, singing, make the darkness glow.
Let me believe I hear my lost youth crying,
His voice in your voice, while the fire is dying.

He sends his love a gift of flowers.

Here's last year's grief
In the green leaf;

And all he knows is
That Time will take
All heartbreak,
And turn it to roses.

On top of a hill . . .

On the top of a hill
Where the wind blows
Am I—
So still,
So high—
And far below the warm fields doze
Quite placidly beneath the trees,
In green and brown
And shot with bees.

he discusses himself.

My mind is like the swaying boughs of trees,
Murmuring with leaves and slender branches
Which ripple in and out above my head
And tangle in the wind.
They throw a shadow
Cool, wide, and deep.
Wherein I wander curiously about,
And sometimes I look up, and through the lacy,
Tumultous entanglement of leaves,
I catch a glimpse of the serene, still sky.

The poet contemplates his daughter in the evening.

Before her supper where she sits
With every favored toe she plays,
Singing whatever ballad fits
The past romances of her days.

The dusk comes softly to her room,
The night winds in the branches stir,
That nations battle to their doom
Across the seas, is naught to her.

For what she does not know, she eats,
A worm, a twig, a block, a fly,
And every novel thing she meets
Is bitten into bye and bye.

She from the blankets of her bed
Holds no opinion on the war,
But munches on her thumb instead,
This being what a thumb is for.

The troubles that invade the day,
On some remote tomorrow creep;
Comes Bertha with the supper tray,
And—now I laymen down ee beep.

He writes in a book of poems.

He who could do the talk for three,
For him, for you, and lonely me,
Now lies without a sound
In the dark ground.

While we, who never speak at all
From garden wall to garden wall,
Of us the waiting dark
Will leave no mark.

Then hear, afar, the faint haloo
From frightened me to frightened you,
And think each cottage light
Is so much less of night.

The poet loses his love.

She bent her head, and all her golden hair
Fell on my face in faint and foaming fall.
I was a city on the sea's gray stair,
With idle ships along the old sea wall.
She spoke, and beauty like an outward tide
Drew all my dreams to sea. So to the foam,
With lifted bows, deliberate with pride,
They cleared me going seaward, going home.
Bare is the ocean after the great gales,
The snowy gulls of silence float above;
Rude rolls the sea o'er unreturning sails,
The deeps will keep my lost and weary love,
While still her beauty with the dying breeze,
Blows on my heart across the empty seas.

The poet is left to himself.

The feet that were not fain to go—
Are gone at last along the stair,
Across the windy hall below,
The door has shut on those dear folk,

And left my house so bare, so bare,
Through cobwebs of forgotten smoke,
Now with a sound of quiet brooms
Comes silence sweeping out her rooms.

He closes his door.

So then to bed and bid the world goodnight.
Slow falls the moon across the western slopes;
See how the city in her lonely light
Puts out like lanterns one by one our hopes.

He endeavors to console himself . . .

When the day in quiet gown
Stands in front of evening's door,
When the sun is safely down
Heaven's steep part;

When the tide across the shore,
Growing darker, foaming whiter,
Turns upon the sea once more,
Seeks the deep part—

When the little moon grows brighter,
Memory, like the lamplighter,
Brings his ladder, sly and slim.
Grief comes running after him.
She will never let him slight her;
What he lights, she will dim—
Go to sleep, heart.

... by thinking that spring, tho' fled, will return.

Tread softly, sorrow, for the summer passes,
Her leaves are falling in continual rain;
Let me be silent as the withered grasses,
Let me be quiet as the gathered grain.
This season that inevitably closes,
The swift returning year again will bring;
The summer passes with a rain of roses,
And winter follows, fading into spring.
So let me, like a tree, with natural reason
Put all my buds to bed at winter's start.
Then in the April of another season,
Beauty will break and blossom in my heart,
And birds renew their youth along the bough,
When all is green—my heart remembers how.

He sings to himself . . .

Love is the first thing.
Love goes past.
Sorrow is the next thing,
Quiet is the last.

Love is a good thing,
Quiet isn't bad,
But sorrow is the best thing
I've ever had.

. . . and listens to the wind.

High in the night, forgotten in the dark,
Over the house the branches of the trees
Sway to the passing of the wind, and hark,
How like the rushing of reverberant seas,
With mightier tongue the gale
Up from the west,
Soars through the whisper and the toss of trees.

Across the silence of this fire lit room,
Where through the dusk and coming of the dark,
The glowing embers thinned,
And out of distances immanent,
Companion voices in ambiguous gales
Fluttered and sang and doubled in the gloom,
I stare at quietness, who is my guest,
And hear the storm and blowing of the wind.

He blames himself . . .

When I was a young man,
I said, bright and bold,
I would be a great one
When I was old.

When I was a young man,
But that was long ago,
I sang the merry old songs
All men know.

When I was a young man,
When I was young and smart,
I think I broke a mirror,
Or a girl's heart.

. . . and feels that since sorrow and he are such
old friends . . .

I am no stranger in the house of pain,
I am familiar with its every part,
From the low stile, then up the crooked lane
To the dark doorway, intimate to my heart.
Here did I sit with grief and eat his bread,
Here was I welcomed as misfortune's guest,
And there's no room but where I've laid my head
On misery's accommodating breast.
So, sorrow, does my knocking rouse you up?
Open the door, old mother; it is I.
Bring grief's good goblet out, the sad, sweet cup,
Fill it with wine of silence, strong and dry:
For I've a story to amuse your ears,
Of youth and hope, of middle age, and tears.

... perhaps it is time to take sorrow more philosophically.

Come, sorrow, time to part, year's turning,
The elm trees borrow
Their last bright colors, last leaves burning—
Winter tomorrow.

You take one path, I the other—
Now clasp hands—
I'll send you news of me, old mother,
From foreign lands.

He decides to travel and bids farewell to his home.

Now fare you well, my road,
And fare you well, my hill,
And for a winter, little house
Rest quietly and still.

For there will be no footsteps
To enter in the gate,
And none to hear the wind now,
When the night is late,

And there will be no fire
To kindle in the gloom,
And there will be no talk now,
To warm each room.

And hushed is the laughter,
And put away the pen,
And dark is the kitchen,
And quiet is the den.

So fare you well, my little house,
And fare you well, my hill.
Old friends, old friends,
Rest quietly and still.

He visits the desert.

Here all is waste,
All is dry and still.
Death is here,
God is here.
They are talking together.
This is my home, says death;
This is my home, says God.

And in my heart, after weeping,
I can hear their low voices.

He finds himself near his love . . .

Just one hill, then, between us,
Just one word?
The rising moon has seen us,
Looked, and heard?

That hill—my feet would take it
Like a bird.
But my heart would never make it—
Not that word.

... but hurries by.

My heart is ever swift to rest, but I am slow to mind it.
I rouse it in the earliest dawn, when other folks are sleeping.
While beauty goes before my face, and sorrow runs
behind it,
I dare not tarry anywhere, lest sorrow catch me weeping.

He bids farewell to his dreams.

Now the round moon on roads above the trees
Walks in the sky, and talks to every star,
But I turn back from roads the like of these
To where my own roads are:

Turn back to desert lands, to lonely, high
Lost hills, and winter woods, and bitter seas;
Only the moon can walk across the sky,
Over the trees.

He remembers past autumns . . .

Five autumns gone—
The same leaves falling,
Unchanging, under
Unchanging skies.
Unaltering voices
Calling, calling . . .
Nothing replies.

Will my heart never
Cry out again
With the old pain,
The old wonder?

. . . and wonders if beauty will ever come to
him again.

Will beauty come when I am old and tired,
Too old for knowing, too old for caring much
How the heart hoped and how the eyes admired,
How the lips sang, how fingers loved to touch?

Will beauty come again when night is falling,
When eyes are dim and weary hands are still,
And call me home—Oh, will I hear her calling
Over the sea again, over the hill?

In the cold and quiet north . . .

So, on a night in winter, with a black wind moving
In solemn tide among incredible stars,
I climbed the long road that led up the hill.
Dark branches bent above me disapproving,
The spacious night was still.
No far sound broke
The frosty silence and the black wind moving.
The hushed voices of the snowy meadows
Crept through the pasture bars.

I topped the hill. One lantern there awoke.
A lonely cottage, and the fields were wide
In a dark, breathless sea. The road went by,
The great wind smote and wrestled with my stride,
And my heart spoke.
"Here," said my heart, "Old winter is at home.
You are not welcome at his fireside."

. . . *he remembers the sun and sea of the southland.*

Oh heart, heart, heart, are you weeping for the west,
For roses, and birdsong, and salt sea foam,
And the clear green sky with the moon upon her breast
Like a ship, like a sail, like a lugger going home?

Oh heart, heart, heart, you are crying in my mouth
For a brown, broad valley—how I know, how I know—
And the same seas singing in the west, in the south,
And two young lovers long ago.

The poet sees the city skyscrapers at evening.

They stand like sentry-boxes, tall and still,
But taller far than any sentry box,
More like an umbrous, lantern-lighted hill,
Or seaward cliffs, or wind-assaulted rocks.
They have no joy or grief, yet each one mocks
The night that over Egypt cast its chill,
The dark that ever at the portal knocks,
The frosty dews that from oblivion spill.
So poets, like old Atlas, bowed with earth,
Their shoulders bent beneath a load of pain,
Careless of idle sorrow, empty of mirth,
Stand to the sky, their feet upon the plain.
These keep the dark at bay, these guard the door,
Their joy behind them, and the night before.

He hears the sound of distant bells . . .

Bells in the country,
They sing the heart to rest
When night is on the high road
And day is in the west.

And once they came to my house
As soft as beggars shod,
And brought it nearer heaven,
And maybe nearer God.

and wonders when his journey will end.

Home, over the hilltop in the night,
The bees go singing still,
Under the stars.

When shall we, too,
With hearts as light,
Go home over the hill?

The poet returns to his home.

O let the waves of quiet break
In snowier foam before my doors,
And gradual, healing silence make
Her music on these shores.

And let me hear, as evening closes,
No more songs, and no more words
To dull the scent of rained-on roses,
Or hush the talk of birds.

He finds himself alone again.

Here in my quiet house, I who was swift to sing,
Wait for your distant hail, wait your beloved call,
Only the autumn leaves over the meadows fall,
Only the wind replies, lonely and whispering.

He considers the passing years . . .

All goes by, the bright fashion,
The brave right, the sad wrong,
The wild love and the gay passion,
The bitter trouble, the sweet song.

And beauty goes, flying, flying,
And men's courage, and women's fears,
And nothing stays but the old crying,
The old sorrow, the old tears.

... and thinks that spring will never return as
gaily as of old.

No more, no more
With the spring's first green
Comes love to the door
With his peddler's pack.

Rap, rap, rap,
Who's to be seen?

*Beggars and tradesmen
Go round to the back.*

He turns to the hills for comfort.

You solemn folk, you hills,
You lonely people,

When tides go out,
Where green deep waters were,
Will only quiet shells
Be left like the white bones
Of old sea bells.

When tides go out,
My hands like prodigals
Creep to each lonely hill,
And wanly offer up
Their river empty bowls
For you to fill.

You hills,
You homely folk,
I shall not come
At some ebb tide.

He longs to lie at last in the southland.

I shall not fear the thought of lying deep
Beneath some windy meadow in the south,
With roses making beautiful my mouth,
And boughs to make a shelter for my sleep.

I shall be glad to hear the ocean sweep
With solemn water through her distant tides,
Content to hear no other thing besides,
Save birds forever singing where I sleep.

He hears a knock at his door.

Knock . . . who knocks at my inhospitable door?
I turn the key.
So, in the evening, I open, and face once more
Mountain and sea.

Shall I behold them, the foamy, irregular shore,
The shadowy steep?
Or is it only the fog and the rain at my door,
Night and the deep?

The poet opens to his guest.

Night and the wind at last, coming afar, faintly the
breaking snow
Of the sea under the dark, whispers and foams; deeper
the meadows grow,
Quieter now the rivers sing to the still trees, and low
boughs swing.
Only a gradual murmur of wings, wings calling and
gathering.
Wings high in the dark, deep in the wind, flutter the
night like rain
Over me where I wait, old and glad, so at the end to go
Swiftly and well indeed. This I ask, only to hear again
Out of the shadow of hills that my curious fingers into
a music made,
Godspeed.
Faintly an echo of singing while the dusk grows and the
chimed voices fade.

He writes his epitaph.

Say he was sad, for there was none to love him,
And sing his song.

Now he is still, and the brown thrush above him
Sings all day long.

Say he was lost, for there was none to find him,
And hold him tight.

Now the brown hands of mother earth will mind him
All through the night.



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Nathan, Robert, 1894-1985.

Youth grows old



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